

It Was a Dark and Stormy Night

By Judy Fritschen

It was early March of the mid 1980's in Kansas. A snowstorm was moving from western Kansas across the state toward eastern Kansas. Interstate 70, a major corridor across the state, was getting more treacherous all the time. Highway closures and school cancellations began in the west and more became necessary as the storm increased in velocity and moved toward the east.

Bill and I lived in Ellis at that time, a small town 15 miles west of Hays along Interstate 70. The Ellis schools had closed for the day and would remain closed until further notice. The storm continued to bring large amounts of snow and showed no signs of letting up any time soon. Westbound traffic along Interstate 70 was being shut down at points in the west first as the storm moved eastward. Travelers were forced to leave the highway. Many checked in at motels. As the motels filled, the highway was shut down at points even further east than the storm as it moved so as not to strand motorists with no place to stay.

It was early in the morning during the snowstorm. The phone rang. It was the superintendent of the Ellis schools. He said a Greyhound bus load of passengers headed for Denver was stranded in Ellis due to the storm. There was not near enough room for them in the few motels available in the small town of Ellis. They were going to take them to the grade school/junior high that housed grades kindergarten through eight. Since Bill was principal of that school he would need to be there to oversee things. Bill advised the superintendent that he was snowed in at our house and would not be able to get to the school. He was advised that a city 4-wheel-drive vehicle would be by to pick him up within the hour.

Shortly after Bill was dropped off at the school, the Greyhound bus arrived. As the passengers entered the school, each was asked to sign in with name, address, and phone number. There were 50 to 60 passengers made up of a variety of races and ethnic backgrounds, and a range in age of 12 to 80 something. Bill was particularly concerned about a gentleman with a bad heart and a woman who was in the later stage of pregnancy. Bill was advised that

should it be necessary a helicopter would come to transport patients to the hospital in nearby Hays.

Fortunately, the electricity did not go off so there were lights, hot water, television, and heat. However, the heating system went down when the boiler quit working, not due to the storm however. The sheriff from Hays brought a boiler repairman in the middle of the night to fix the heating system. The guests were given basketballs and could shoot baskets or play basketball if they wished. They could go to the library where a television set was tuned in to the NCAA Basketball Tournament that just happened to be going on at that time. That was a popular activity. Town people who could get to the school brought blankets, cards, and games. The grocery store opened and the school cooks went there to get food supplies. They came to the school and cooked three meals a day for everyone. The passengers were given towels and allowed to use the locker rooms and take showers. At night they slept in various classrooms on blankets on the floor. In spite of the raging storm, some of the young, more adventurous guests decided to explore the town on foot. They were advised the doors to the school would be locked at 10:00 PM for everyone's safety. They managed to find the local pool hall, which was actually open, and of course they were late getting back to the school. They banged on the door and of course Bill let them in.

After two days the snow finally stopped. The passengers were elated! Finally, they could resume their journey. However, Interstate 70 was still closed. It took another day for the snow to be cleared and the highway opened for traffic. That meant another day and night before the bus continued its journey west toward Denver. The travelers were disappointed but nonetheless appreciative for the services they received while stranded for three days and nights at the Ellis school. They took up a collection of around \$500.00 to help pay for food and other services. I would say this was an example of small town hospitality at its best.